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CINEPHILE 14.1

Beyond the Space Jockey: YouTube, Morphogenetic Paratexts and the *Alien* Universe

The *Alien* cinematic franchise has been subject to much critical scrutiny within the academy. From the moment the first installment burst onto our movie screens in 1979, scholars have attempted to unpack and decode the latent and manifest sociocultural meanings embedded within this seminal series of cinematic horror. Studies have built a rich tapestry of understanding, exploring the franchise via lenses such as the monstrous mother (Creed; Kember; Newton); abjection (Kristeva); dreadful architectures (Benson-Allott); infertility (Grech et al.); gender inversions, male-birthing and the feminization of the hero (Greenberg; Kavanagh; Luckhurst); asexuality (Dervin); post-humanism and sexual violence (Hurley); as well as human, technological and environmental hybridity (Littau).

It is the latter of these conceptualizations, Karin Littau's discussion of morphogenesis, which is of most interest to this paper. For Littau, the morphogenesis of the titular alien's reproductive cycle is mirrored by the cycle of canonic hybridization within the cinematic franchise. Each new installment can be seen to hybridize with elements of the preceding installments (as well as the *Predator* franchise) and explore new genre modes, allowing the series to simultaneously inhabit a number of distinct filmic niches (Littau 19-32). For example, where Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) is a slow paced exploration of confined survival horror, James Cameron's *Aliens* (1987) is fast paced action movie, leaving David Fincher's *Alien³* (1992) and Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Alien Resurrection* (1997) to inhabit separate cult spaces, before Paul W. S. Anderson's *Alien vs. Predator* (2004) and the Brothers Strause' *Aliens vs. Predator: Requiem* (2007) moved the franchise into the realm of the monster mash-up, paving the way for Ridley

Scott to return and tie up (or perhaps not) the loose ends via his prequel installments *Prometheus* (2012) and *Alien: Covenant* (2017).

This hybridization is not, however, limited to the motion pictures alone. Littau extends this process to the ancillary products and narratives of the franchise, such as comic books, novelizations and games (22). Considering this is a form of cross-media storytelling, which “is not the same thing as adaptation, but [...] involves adaptation at each juncture ‘as’ or ‘where’ a serial fragment is tied into the ‘whole’” (Littau 32), Littau situates the *Alien* concept as cross-medially realizable, where the *Alien* concept crosses itself with the host-medium rather than performing a separation, therein resisting the notion of definitive or single authorship. Indeed, it is these processes of cross-media storytelling and shared ownership, along with the advent and expansion of the YouTube platform, which invite the return to, and further exploration of, the morphogenetic properties of the *Alien* concept, via the lens of the consumer created paratext.

In the lead up to the cinematic release of *Alien: Covenant* in 2017, there was a proliferation of *Alien* related ‘lore’ and ‘explained’ videos across the YouTube platform. These fan generated videos, produced independently from 20th Century Fox, Brandywine Productions or Scott Free Productions, explained, recounted and speculated upon the backstories and potential future narratives of the *Alien* franchise. YouTube channels such as, *Mr H Reviews*, *AcidGlow*, *HN Entertainment* and *Alien Theory*¹ serve as key examples of how such ancillary texts can function as consumer generated cross-media artefacts, contributing to the development of an *Alien* ‘mythos’ that configures, and is configured by, consumer experiences and audience expectations.

¹ As of December 15th 2019, The HN Entertainment YouTube channel has approx. 411,000 subscribers with 236,973,911 total views; the MR H Reviews YouTube channel has approx. 226,000 subscribers with 84,270,690 total views; the Acid Glow YouTube channel has approx. 202,000 subscribers with 106,174,667 total views; and the Alien Theory YouTube channel has approx. 165,000 subscribers with 33,659,273 total views.

The creators behind such channels use the YouTube platform to enable a more immersive mode of consumption for those fans of the *Alien* franchise who, like them, are motivated to search for information that exists beyond the canon texts. Through the production of ‘lore’ or ‘explained’ videos, the *Alien* related artefacts produced by the channels are specifically designed to surround (Consalvo 177; Genette 1-5; Genette and Maclean 261), and negotiate expectations about (Bilder and Rathemacher 50), the wider *Alien* concept.

In this fashion, these videos clearly function as paratexts, connecting additional knowledge and interpretations to the *Alien* concept, thereby framing and configuring consumer experience (Consalvo 177; Malone 19). The crucial difference here, in relation to conventional cinematic paratexts such as movie posters and trailers, is that this knowledge is processed and curated by fans, for fans, out of the purview of 20th Century Fox and its official licensees. For the consumers of such YouTube videos, therefore, these unauthorized paratexts become a part of the apparatus through which the wider *Alien* concept proposes itself (Genette and Maclean 261).

This places the *Alien* related outputs of channels such as, *Mr H Reviews*, *AcidGlow*, *HN Entertainment* and *Alien Theory* in a similar paratextual hierarchy (Brookey and Gray 102) as the official paratextual output, where they share the same spatiality in relation to the location of the central *Alien* concept (Genette 4-5). As such, both forms of paratext, official and unofficial, operate outside (Brookey and Gray 102) the central core of the *Alien* concept, forming thresholds (Klecker 402) that negotiate entrance to (Draper 131), and influence consumer reception of (Klecker 402), that central concept. It is important to note, however, that in doing so, these unofficial ‘lore’ and ‘explained’ videos are not forms of fan fiction or ‘fanon’ texts (Jenkins) in the traditional sense, but rather, evidence based paratexts, compiling and (re-)presenting existing information drawn from the narrative complexity of the central *Alien* concept.

This mode of paratextual creation draws, therefore, upon a forensic mode of fandom that invites viewers to dig deep beneath the surface of the cannon texts, ‘drilling’ down through the complexity of the *Alien* cinematic universe to understand, unpack and probe the mechanisms of the story and its telling (Mittell "Lost in a Great Story"). In this way, the *Alien* related outputs of channels such as, *Mr H Reviews*, *AcidGlow*, *HN Entertainment* and *Alien Theory* can be conceptualized as fan forensics, positing “interpretations about the story world and its potential outcomes [...] to theorize possible explanations, to play paratextual games, and to draw connections among the broad range of [...] transmedia extensions, and external cultural references” (Mittell "Forensic Fandom"), thereby enriching the intellectual property of the *Alien* cinematic universe, rather than specifically creating new works of fan fiction that modify or advance the *Alien* concept.

For Mittell, such modes of paratextual fan creation and curation “aggregates engagement by directing it inward toward the core” (Mittell "Forensic Fandom") of the canonic texts themselves, facilitating a form of collective engagement for a smaller, but more dedicated, audience of fans. This would appear to “run counter to many of the practices and examples of spreadable media”, with “drillable media typically engag[ing] far fewer people, but occupying more of their time and energies” (Mittell "Forensic Fandom"). In this way, Mittell proposes that spreadable and drillable texts occupy opposing vectors of cultural engagement, where spreadable media encourages horizontal ripples that accumulate eyeballs, whereas drillable media encourages vertical descent into a text’s complexities. However, as the very nature of the YouTube platform, and its process of monetization, depends upon and encourages creators and consumers to spread content, the *Alien* related ‘lore’ and ‘explored’ videos can be seen to operate on both vectors simultaneously (a position not precluded by Mittell).

Much like Littau's notion of the canonical hybridization within the *Alien* cinematic franchise mirroring the titular alien's reproductive cycle (25), such simultaneous 'spreading' and 'drilling' can also be seen as analogous to the parasitical nature of the *Alien* as an invasive species. Starting the procreative cycle with a clutch of *Eggs* laid by an *Alien Queen*, the *Alien* lifeform 'spreads' to hosts through physical contact, where, upon close proximity to a potential host, the *Egg* releases a larval *Facehugger*, which uses a proboscis to 'drill' down into the esophagus of the host and implant an embryo, which, after a short gestation period, 'drills' out through the host body to emerge as a *chestburster* that quickly grows into a mature *Alien*, which in turn, occupies itself with starting the cycle anew.

As such, it is possible to view the *Alien* related output of channels such as, *Mr H Reviews*, *AcidGlow*, *HN Entertainment* and *Alien Theory* as a furthering of the morphogenesis of the *Alien* concept. In this morphogenesis, the processes of multiple authorship, and the unclear and contested creative progenitors of the *Alien* cinematic universe (Littau 21-22), have led to the evolution of a loose, intentionally ephemeral and imprecise conceptualization of the *Alien* franchise. Conceptualized in this way, the canonical entries function as drillable texts that can be crossed with the spreadable YouTube host-medium. This crossing opens up paratextual pathways for curious fans, who seek clarity and understanding beyond the ambiguity of the canon texts, to enter into discussion outside the sphere of the canon, by consuming, and thereby funding, the videos that appeal to them most. Indeed, many of the aforementioned channels offer Patreon as an optional content funding platform, further bringing the YouTube audience and creators together in the development and direction of the fan forensic videos produced. In this way such 'lore' and 'explained' videos hybridize with the canonic texts and their audiences enabling the

Alien concept to inhabit another simultaneous niche, that of a wider fan-curated *Alien* mythos that lies beyond the sole authorship of the official licensees or YouTube creators.

Of the channels mentioned above, the output of the *Alien Theory* YouTube channel serves, perhaps, as the most marked example of this paratextual and authorial morphogenesis. With a sixty-nine member Patreon fan community, known as the *Hive*, contributing \$359 US dollars per month² beyond any Google AdSense revenue generated by channel views³, the *Alien Theory* channel creates video content that explains the lore of the *Alien* cinematic universe. In doing so, the channel draws heavily on the aesthetics of Scott's *Alien* and Cameron's *Aliens* to form simulacra that cross the aesthetics of the *Alien* cinematic franchise with the YouTube medium to construct a look and soundscape that is instantly recognizable to the consumers of the wider *Alien* concept. Indeed, such are the aesthetics of the feature video on the *Alien Theory* channel homepage, *Weyland-Yutani: Corporate Timeline*⁴, that at first glance, the content seems almost indistinguishable from the officially licensed outputs.

Adopting the green and black low resolution color palette utilized by the computer and video monitors of the original movie, the video opens with the distinctive interference patterns and associated static sound effects familiar to the consumers of the first two cinematic installments (figure 1). This is followed by the mimesis of a *Wayland Yutani Corporation* operating system, utilizing the official form of the *Wayland Yutani* corporate logo from the cinematic franchise (figure 2), before transitioning to a faux official privileged information disclaimer (figure 3).

² Patreon data correct as of December 15th 2019.

³ Google AdSense data is proprietary and as such cannot be quantified in this paper.

⁴ As of December 15th 2019, The *Weyland-Yutani: Corporate Timeline* video on the *Alien Theory* YouTube channel has 486,911 total views.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

This cooption of the cinematic aesthetic at the outset of the video serves to immerse the viewer in the *Alien* concept via familiarity and negotiate viewer expectations about the forthcoming content. These initial textual elements hybridized from the cinematic franchise become, therefore, peritexts, or paratexts situated in the space of a text (Genette and Maclean 263-264). This forms a cyclical paratextual relationship, where the *Weyland-Yutani: Corporate Timeline* video is a paratext of the wider *Alien* concept, and the textual elements borrowed from the cinematic franchise are peritexts contained within that paratext, “emphasizing generic elements which promote certain reading strategies and shape (...) viewers’ textual understandings” (Bernabo 169).

After this set up, the narrative of the video continues to draw upon, select and reorder, specific textual information from across the main canonical texts (figures 4-6), utilizing these narrative fragments, along with connective narration and additional stock footage, to curate an accessible understanding of the *Wayland Yutani Corporation* for the viewer. In doing so, the video constructs a unified concept (Mahlknecht 418) located in one confined space, rather than diffusely spread across the wider *Alien* concept, becoming the “would-be urban planner[.] and

land developer[...] of the textual world (...) trying to direct us one way or another, to get us through a text in a particular way” (Brookey and Gray 107). Conceptualized as such, the video is a notable example of Littau’s notion of cross-media storytelling, where adaptation of the canonical texts occurs “at each juncture ‘as’ or ‘where’ a serial fragment is tied into the ‘whole’” (Littau 32) myths of the *Wayland Yutani Corporation*.

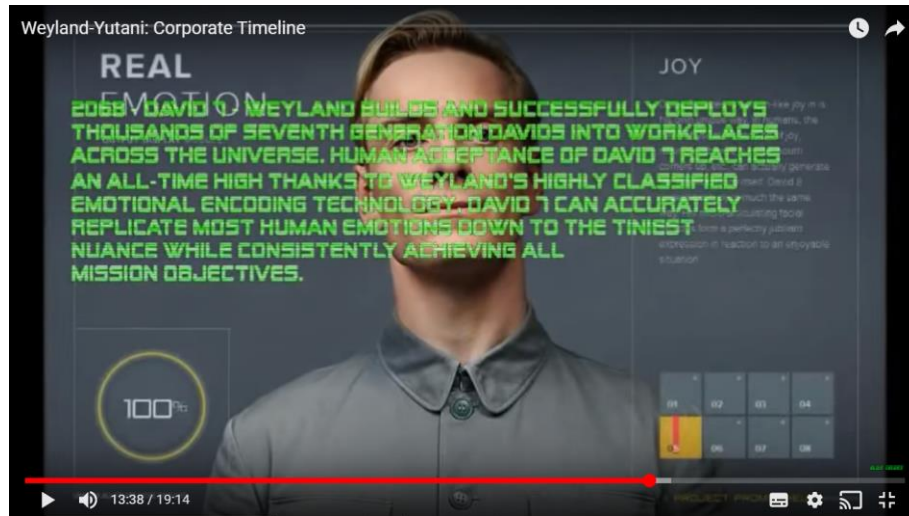


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

This curatorial process can be seen, therefore, as an attempt to focus the viewer's attention on the core *Wayland Yutani* narrative spine, which, beyond the titular alien, is the most consistent organizing principle of the cinematic franchise. Here, the content of the *Alien Theory* channel drills down into the mythology of the canonical texts, selecting and reorganizing textual fragments to construct a paratextual archive that functions as a threshold (Klecker 402) negotiating entrance to (Draper 131), and influencing the consumption of (Klecker 402), this central element of the wider cinematic franchise. In this way, the *Alien Theory* channel acts as the fan archivist, forensically extracting pertinent information from across the cinematic universe to “create magnets for engagement, drawing viewers into story worlds and urging them to drill down to discover more” (Mittell “Forensic Fandom”).

Inspired by Littau's articulation of how the morphogenetic nature of the *Alien* concept facilitated the intra-canonical hybridisation of the core texts of the cinematic universe, this paper demonstrates how those same morphogenetic properties have, via content creators such as *Mr H Reviews*, *AcidGlow*, *HN Entertainment* and *Alien Theory*, further hybridised with the properties of the YouTube platform to develop a nexus of unofficial paratexts. By coopting the aesthetics of

the *Alien* cinematic franchise, these ‘lore’ and ‘explained’ videos construct paratextual and peritextual materials that promote, via familiarity, particular reading strategies for their audience. However, rather than functioning as conventional fan fictions that expand the *Alien* concept with ‘new’ content; such videos created by fans, for fans, function as a form of forensic fandom, drawing upon the cross-medially realizable properties of the wider *Alien* concept to expand the notion of ownership.

Indeed, while ‘lore’ and ‘explained’ YouTube videos exist for other cinematic franchises, it is the ephemeral and imprecise elements of the wider *Alien* concept, brought about by the shifting and inconsistent authorship of the canonical texts, along with the associated increase in narrative complexity of the cinematic franchise, that makes the texts of the *Alien* universe particularly drillable. By their very nature, these unofficial paratexts are designed, therefore, to surround (Consalvo 177; Genette 1-5; Genette and Maclean 261), and negotiate expectations about (Bilder and Rathemacher 50), the *Alien* concept. By drilling deep down into the body of the canonical texts, content creators such as *Mr H Reviews*, *AcidGlow*, *HN Entertainment* and *Alien Theory* extract narrative embryos, which, after a period of gestation where they hybridize with the YouTube host medium, erupt from the body of the canon as morphogenetic paratexts, to spread a fan curated mythos that both configures, and is configured by, consumer experiences and audience expectations.

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